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# Riveting Vietnamese and American Culture Through Jewelry Alchemy

Thoa Kim DiChiara

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RIVETING VIETNAMESE AND AMERICAN CULTURE  
THROUGH JEWELRY ALCHEMY

A Thesis

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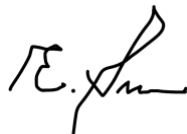
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# RIVETING VIETNAMESE AND AMERICAN CULTURE THROUGH JEWELRY ALCHEMY

By Thoa Kim DiChiara

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirement for the Master of Individualized Graduate Program in  
The Department of Jewelry and Metalsmithing  
Rhode Island College

2021

## Abstract

I began my journey as a graduate student with a comprehensive semester-long study on the history of craft and its significance as a cultural, social, and art object. The discovery of the presence of jewelry at the site of the Skhul cave in Israel, one of the earliest known civilizations of modern humans, proves humans have always had the undeniable need for jewelry. Throughout history, humans have been wearing jewelry to define identity as individuals and members of society. Adorning oneself with jewelry has been a constant across time, religion, culture, class, and gender. Jewelry acts as an agent of individual expression because it can embody and convey aspects of memory, friendship, love, work, and interest which are building blocks of identity. Jewelry is a form of visual communication with the ability to preserve identity, culture, traditions, beliefs, and values.

My graduate research involves a deep exploration of the visual and material language found in jewelry throughout history as it relates to deeper social, cultural, and personal ideologies. The topics that I focus on include wearable metalwork of the United States (western culture) as well as the traditional jewelry and metalwork of Vietnam (eastern culture) and all of the social, cultural, and personal implications these subjects carry for me.

In this body of work, I rivet my Vietnamese and American culture through jewelry alchemy. Along the way, I explore my identity, sculpt and preserve the four sacred Animals of Vietnam which are building blocks to Vietnam's belief system. I create chains that feature boar heads, the last animal in the Lunar Zodiac. I emerge unapologetically with crowns that proudly pronounce myself and arrive at my altar with heirloom pendants and brooches. Lastly, I honor my family history with wearables that feature salt clusters and family gold. This body of work helped me discover deeper parts of my true self.

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# Riveting Vietnamese and American Culture Through Jewelry Alchemy

By  
Thoa Kim DiChiara

## Identity

I continued my graduate research with Johan Von Aswegen by practicing techniques with lost wax casting where I explored my identity. I've always felt a little different like I never quite fit into society. I discovered this in elementary school when I was surrounded by American classmates and teachers. At school, I wanted to be completely American, at home I was Vietnamese. I was confused, always searching for my identity.



*Self-Portrait Brooch  
Bronze and Stainless Steel  
Fall 2017*

I made an additive wax self-portrait. I began making this piece by drawing a blind contour self-portrait. This line represents the movement of my life that has shaped me into the woman that I am. From the contour drawing, my portrait transformed. The lines got broken up, more concrete shapes emerged and a more refined image surfaced. I built my self-portrait in layers

melted on top of each other, much like the layers that embody who I am.

I continued by looking at heritage as it relates to traditional female roles in Vietnam.

I made a bronze pendant inspired by the female rice farmers of Vietnam. The silhouette is in the shape of a vagina, which is inspired by American feminism, and the bail is inspired by the silhouette of a rice paddy hat. On one side of the pendant, the metal reveals the rice hills of Sapa, Vietnam, offering a bird's-eye view of a textured rice paddy hat and a growing rice plant. The other side of the

pendant reveals a vagina. This celebrates American feminism with a tribute to the strong working women of Vietnam. This pendant was created by using a subtractive method of wax carving and made with precise repetitive movements much like the hands of the Sapa women of Vietnam who harvest rice.



*Woman of Vietnam Vagina Pendant  
Bronze  
Fall 2017*



*Touching Fingers  
Bronze and Swarovski Crystals  
Fall 2017*

My exploration gained momentum with my completely individualized fingerprints. I created press molds of my fingers and poured molten wax into them to create bronze replicas of my two index fingers. I then riveted these fingers onto three different styles of chains. These metal replica index fingers touch at the fingertips with



magnets acting as a clasp representing my self-reliance and independence.

My index finger motif continued on a cuff bracelet paired with Laughing Buddha. My fingers resemble the spikes commonly seen in America, often on leather, in the 90s. Swarovski crystals are embedded on each of the fingernails, an ode to my childhood when I began practicing nail art in the fourth grade at my aunt's nail salon. I loved adorning my nails with crystals. These fingers are paired



*Spike Fingers and Laughing Buddha Cuff  
Bronze and Swarovski Crystals  
Fall 2017*

with the symbolic Laughing Buddha who is known to bring wealth, good luck, and joyful

blessings. He is commonly seen as a pendant and as a statue on altars, and at temples.



*My Tribe Necklace 1 and 2  
Bronze  
Fall 2017*

The final pieces of this collection are necklaces inspired by the jewelry of the native tribes of Vietnam. The pieces that compose my necklace represent the people, items, and interests of my community. The Laughing Buddha is a rose quartz stone given to me by my sister, Trinh, as a memento from her visit to Vietnam. The orchid flower represents my connection to nature and the need to nourish the people in my life while I watch them bloom. The rabbit and penguin were magnets on my husband's refrigerator, representing Americans' fascination with Asian culture, and the rice grains represent my mother's desire to feed our communities.

Looking back on the work, I realize there are many layers to my identity, from my merging cultures, to the people in my life, to the interest that drives my force. I see my uniqueness without the need to fit any mold, except my own.

### **Culture**

I became interested in the idea of alchemy as a method and the ring as my vehicle. The finger ring is a volumetric object that occupies and suggests space like sculpture. I created the four sacred animals of Vietnam in my rendition of a contemporary ring. "The ring has always conveyed strong mythical and legendary resonances", which "shows how beliefs and superstitions can still persist and be effective in our day" (Lambert 254). Attached to each of the four sacred animals, there is a Vietnamese folk story full of symbolism that influences the belief systems of Vietnam's culture. I studied Vietnamese lacquer paintings, looked at sculptures seen in Vietnamese temples and gardens, and also reminisced about the numerous Tết (Vietnamese Lunar New Year) celebrations I enjoyed. I took inspiration from traditional Vietnamese art and culture and made them contemporary by creating sculptural rings.

Animal head rings with stones for eyes that I often see on Americans also played a big part in the inspiration of this collection. Animals symbolize virtues, character traits, and values. Celebrating these Vietnamese animals and telling their symbolic stories is a way I want to preserve Vietnamese culture for the future generations of my family.



*Tortoise Ring  
Copper and Epoxy Clay  
Spring 2018*

The Northern Tortoise is the most ancient of the four sacred animals of Vietnam. It is said to be one thousand years old. It represents strength and longevity. It is the embodiment of firmness and endurance (“The 4 Sacred Animals In Vietnamese Culture”). Of the four sacred animals, it is the only real animal, the rest are mythical. The band is made of eight gauge copper sheet metal formed into a ring that curves up to create a pedestal. A scrap piece of copper

sheet sits on top of the pedestal. I formed, pinched, pressed, coiled, and cut epoxy clay to create the tortoise. I painted the wearable sculpture with my homemade conductive paint and electroformed it for approximately twelve hours. Electroforming is a process that involves a rectifier that moves metal from an anode onto a conductive surface in an acid bath using currents. The preserved tortoise sits on top of this pedestal-like ring to forever hold its story and our family history.

I wanted to push the boundaries of a single ring so I designed a three-part ring that weaves in and out of the fingers to form the Eastern Dragon, another sacred Vietnamese animal. The first ring is the head, the middle is the body, and the end is a

seductive twisted tail. This elongated body signifies the longevity of the powerful leading



*3 Part Dragon Ring  
Patinated Sterling Silver  
Spring 2018*

dragon ("The 4 Sacred Animals In Vietnamese Culture"). The dragon is a symbol of power, which is why I got this piece cast in sterling silver. It reminds the people of Vietnam to free themselves from restrictions and limitations, a message that resonates with me. I have felt restricted by my parents growing up as female. Their restrictions inspired me to identify as a feminist in my middle and high school years.

I made the Southern Unicorn ring with a thick copper band and then sculpted epoxy clay onto the band, similar to the animal head rings often seen on Americans. One of my favorite traditions of Tết is the múa lân (a unicorn/lion/dragon dance). It is often performed by two people dressed in a festive costume along with drummers. One person is the head and another person the back of the animal. The acrobatic dancers jump, hop, and lift each other.



*Unicorn Ring  
Copper and Epoxy Clay  
Spring 2018*

They dance in unison creating a climate of harmony, serenity, and happiness as a manifestation of good fortune and well-being for the people. The unicorn represents



prestige, peace, and good luck. It is a mythical creature that is strong, faithful, and intelligent (“The 4 Sacred Animals In Vietnamese Culture”).



*Phoenix Ring  
Copper, Epoxy Clay, and Branch  
Spring 2018*

The Western Phoenix is a mythological bird that reigns over all the birds. It represents nobility, virtue, grace, movement, and pride. It has the neck of a snake, the breast of a swallow, the back of a tortoise, and the tail of a fish. The six celestial parts it embodies are the head for the sky, eyes for the sun and moon, wings for the wind, feet for the earth, and the tail for planets. It perches on high places and makes musical sounds. It can stand on the waves of

the sea and uses its supernatural powers to soar mightily over the mountains. Its feathers light up in flames. Sometimes it carries two scrolls or a box with long bands in its bill containing sacred books. Phoenix songs have all five notes of the traditional musical scale. When sculpting this Phoenix ring, I found the perfect branch that my epoxy phoenix could sit upon. I designed this phoenix to perch on top of a round band that sits proudly on a finger. Giving the phoenix gestural energy through movements from the fingers, arms, and body. (“The 4 Sacred Animals In Vietnamese Culture”)

I dove into electroforming by indulging myself in deep realms of information found on an electroforming Facebook Page where I felt supported by a community of strangers. I learned how to mix my electroforming bath and made my conductive paint to push my money further, a skill I learned from my foreign penny-pinching parents. I

practiced the alchemy of materials by transforming epoxy clay into metal for preservation. I found beauty in the process of covering material in a coat of copper giving it the ability to be preserved for longer, in hopes that my Vietnamese culture will be protected.

### **The End of an Era**

In my next body of work, I celebrated Tết 2019. “Just as the Jade Emperor was about to call it a day, an oink and squeal was heard from a little Pig. The Pig got hungry during the race, promptly stopped for a feast and then fell asleep” (“The Great Race – Origins Of The Chinese Zodiac”). The lunar calendar is a twelve-year cycle ending with the zodiac animal, the boar. This collection of work represents the end of an era, where old ideologies dim, changeinflects, and new ideas arise.

The first boar chain in my collection is a heavy sterling silver chain that sits on the chest at twenty-eight inches. The chain is made up of round links in five different sizes. “The circle as seen in a ring has a picture of perfection and eternity. As an enveloping, closed-form, the circle has a function of protection and insulation” (Lambert 258). Other links that make up the chain include a link that loops once like a boar’s tail and another link with double spirals representing



*Year of the Boar Chain  
Sterling Silver, 14K Yellow Gold, and  
9mm Swarovski Crystals  
Spring 2019*

a longer tail. The chain also features five boar heads wearing fourteen-karat yellow gold hoops on either its ears or septum. A ring on the septum represents submission, accepting its defeat, and end.



*Boar and Watermelon Seed Choker  
Brass, Sterling Silver, and Preserved  
Watermelon Seeds  
Spring 2019*

The second piece in this collection is a choker necklace made of brass figure eight links, riveted with sterling silver bails, holding watermelon seeds. Watermelon seeds represent “richness and luckiness” every Tết. You often see Vietnamese people tediously opening each seed with a precise bite to split the seed open to reveal the watermelon seed, similar to a sunflower seed but more elongated and flat. On the choker, each unopened watermelon seed is preserved in coats of polyurethane to preserve the red dye

on the seed that brings good luck and fortune to the wearer. The sterling silver bail mimics the shape of a watermelon seed when flat. A brass wire is riveted through the watermelon seed and sterling bail to securely hold them in place. This process represents the connection of old traditions to new forms.

The last piece in this series is a modular piece that can be worn or hung in various orientations. It is made up of eight hoàng mai (yellow mai flower) branches that have been electroformed to preserve the plant matter eternally. The branches are connected with sterling silver swivel caps that are riveted to five jump ring chains that

allow them to move freely. A boar head with a nine-millimeter Swarovski crystal on the back also hangs with the branches. Hoàng mai's scientific name is *Ochna integerrima*, also known as the yellow apricot flower. It is a small tree or shrub with yellow flowers that bloom during Tết making it the most spectacular tradition. Vietnamese people remove all the leaves one month before Tết, which moves all the sap into the flower buds for a spectacular yellow flowering that brings good luck ("Yellow Apricot Flower (Hoa Mai) –Symbol of Tết in Vietnam"). This chain talks about our ever-changing ability to adapt to new circumstances while celebrating and preserving old traditions.



*Modular Hoàng Mai Boar Chain  
Electroformed Copper on Hoàng Mai  
Branches and Flowers, Sterling Silver,  
14K Yellow Gold, and  
9MM Swarovski Crystals  
Spring 2019*

### **Emerging**

With the end of an era within sight, I let go of old Vietnamese customs and traditions and celebrate more modern parts of my Vietnamese culture with crowns. "Crowns are a traditional symbolic form of headgear worn by a monarch or deity representing power, legitimacy, victory, triumph, honor, glory, immortality, righteousness, and resurrection" ("Crown Icon").

The first crown I made celebrates the beloved tropical fruit I ate as a child called longan, it is also known as dragon eye fruit. It is a tree species that is part of the



soapberry family, lychee and rambutan also belong to this family. It has a thin brown shell that is peeled to reveal its juicy translucent flesh with a seed in the middle that resembles an eyeball. The seed is small, round, hard, enamel-like, and lacquered black.

I was inspired by the entrance arch of Chinatown in Boston, to showcase the dragon



*Longan Arch Crown  
Brass and Longan Seeds  
Fall 2019*

eye seeds. I took the Chinatown gate arch and simplified its form into contemporary minimalist architectural lines that allow the longan seeds to dance upon one's head. As a child, my mom constantly fed us fruit with many tropical varieties unknown to my American childhood friends. Oftentimes, I would feel shame and embarrassment eating unfamiliar foods around them, but now I proudly share and eat these foods.

The second crown I made celebrates jade. Jade is a stone I have worn since childhood. It is a Vietnamese “cultural symbol that is believed to keep negative thoughts, wishes, and bad spirits away from the wearer” (Sturm). granting them good luck. The Vietnamese also consider it a “protector of generations, living and dead”. The stone “has been



*Jade Crown  
Brass and Jade Stones  
Fall 2019*

worn in Vietnam since 5000 B.C. It has also been used in tools and weapons. Jade pieces from the Nguyễn (my maiden surname) dynasty (1802-1945) have been found inscribed with the seal of kings, or poetry which suggest that jade has a connection with royalty.” (Sturm). This celebratory jade crown is made up of seven jade stones. The center of the crown showcases a large jade donut stone that sits on the third eye of the forehead. The third eye is known to provide perception beyond ordinary sight. The jade donut is held by a handmade brass claw setting with four prongs. On each side of the jade center stone, there are three smaller jade stones, two darker green oval stones, and a light green square stone between them. These stones are also held by handmade brass prong settings soldered to a brass band that sits on the head, similar to the way an American hippie from the mid-1960s wore a daisy crown.



*Fight the Patriarch Crown  
Brass  
Fall 2019*

The third crown I designed was inspired by a Vietnamese crown motif commonly worn during Tết and by Vietnamese brides paired with the traditional *áo dài* dress. The crown is made up of four layers of twenty-six gauge brass sheet metal that is soldered or riveted together. When it sits on the head the crown creates a radiant circle mimicking a halo. A halo is often seen on spiritual characters through the symbolism

of light. I needed light when making this crown. I struggled. I worked through many failed attempts and ideas in the construction of this piece and experienced an emotional

block that stood in the way of my confidence and skill to complete this crown. It was a turning point in my Vietnamese-American experience to stand up to the Vietnamese cultural ways I do not agree with and proudly stand up for my new contemporary belief system. The first halo on the crown reads, "Mới ba đi ăn" in my mother's handwriting. It translates into a polite way to invite a father to dinner. This was a phrase my siblings and I were forced to say to my dad when dinner was ready. We would have to go up to him, cross our arms, bow, and ask him to dinner. Even now, as an adult, my mom still forces this phrase out of me. This common request of my mother has left me feeling rebellious, disrespected, and angry for many years. I found myself whispering under my breath "No, I don't want to." and this is how this phrase (in my hand-writing) landed on the second halo tier of this crown announcing my boundaries, allowing me to let go of an old era and forming the foundation of how I want to raise the future generations of my family.

### Altar



*Top: Altar Chain 1*

*Middle: Altar Pendant 1, Altar Brooch 2, Gold Altar Pendant, Altar Pendant 2, Altar Brooch 1*

*Bottom: Altar Chain 2*

*Sterling Silver, 24k Yellow Gold, Stainless Steel, Swarovski Crystals, and Jade Stones  
Spring 2020*

In this series, I arrived at my Altar. The Vietnamese altar is where we pray to our ancestors during Tết and on their death anniversaries. We adorn altars with plates of food, fruit, and flowers to honor our family history, and give gratitude to our ancestors. While holding incense, we ask them to grant us our hopes, dreams, and wishes. I created three pendants, two brooches, and two chains inspired by the altar. I looked at lines, shapes, and repetitions on my mom's altar, my paternal aunt's altar, and revisited some local Vietnamese Buddhist temples I grew up going to. I also decided to visit my mom and ask her if she had any gold she could pass on to me, so I could create some altar jewelry pieces meant to become family heirlooms. This was a huge ask since my parents arrived in the United States with nothing on themselves except the clothes on their backs. Everything we have now are items we acquired after their arrival.

Occasionally, my siblings, and I would open my mother's jewelry drawer with her. We would lay on my parents' bed and sift through my mom's jewelry pieces made of eighteen-karat yellow gold and jade. Over the years, she allowed us to pick pieces to wear, trade out, or possibly keep. I have always cherished and held onto each piece with meticulous care since childhood. On January 12, 2020, my mother handed me 2.38 ounces of twenty-four karat gold. It came in the forms of very thin Asian sheet metal, irregular gold ingots, and old unwanted gold jewelry. To keep this gold in my own trusted hands I decided to explore sand casting. Sand Casting allowed me to recycle my metal in the comfort of my studio. I took the large jade donut stone from the Jade Crown piece and began sand casting the stone to create five donut motifs in sterling silver and one in twenty-four karat yellow gold. These metal donut motifs replicated from the jade stone took on an organic quality that has an ancient feel to them. I paired these motifs with

lines and shapes inspired by the altars in my life. I gave these items more value by adding a variety of stones that are set in bezels or step bezels. I hope these pieces will be held, worn, and cherished by my family for generations to come so our story can live on.

### **Honoring Family**

In my last collection, I paid tribute to the maternal side of my family, who were salt farmers on a small island in Vietnam. Inspired by the sand casting and my urge to recycle my precious metals, I began salt casting. Salt casting is the art of pouring molten metal over salt, it creates spontaneous forms and unusual irregular metal shapes. I poured sterling silver over large bath salts, sea salt, kosher salt, and fine table salt. I found the bath salts to form the most interesting shapes. I loved how the frozen molten metal wrapped around the large crystals holding the large salt crystals in place. Concerned with the soft sea salt, I decided to dig out the plethora of quartz crystals I mined in Arkansas during a month-long road trip while exploring the fascinating depths



*Salt Crystal Choker and Earrings  
Brass, Patinated Sterling Silver, Quartz Crystal, and Jade  
Fall 2020*



of America. Instead of pouring molten metal over salt, I decided to pour molten metal over the small quartz crystals, which closely resembles a salt crystal. To hold these sterling silver and crystal clusters, I fabricated settings for the clusters using square brass wire that I rolled out slightly in a rolling mill.

The first piece I made was a choker that is made up of four sterling silver crystal clusters, and four-cylinder jade stones set in handmade claw settings. These parts are held together by handmade brass jump rings in two different sizes with an “M” clasp that is commonly seen on Vietnamese chains. I also made a pair of earrings that complement the choker in the same style.



Five Part Modular Salt Crystal Chain  
Brass, Sterling Silver, Quartz Crystals, 50mm Rose Quartz Stone, and 2 Glass Rings  
Fall 2020

Another piece of the salt crystal collection is an eight-foot modular chain that is made up of five parts that can be worn layered, extended, or singular. It represents our changing nature, where we choose parts that resonate with us, build upon them, or

remove what doesn't work. Each of the five parts consists of links in two different chain designs that are approximately nine inches long. The five parts vary in length with alternating chain designs. One design is made up of eight "M" links connected with round jump rings, the other design is made up of thirteen round jump rings that progress in size from big to small to big again. Two parts feature a glass ring in rose pink and jade green connecting the alternating chains. Two other parts feature large self-mined quartz crystals in brass claw settings, and one part exhibits a 50 millimeter rose quartz donut stone. All five parts include a sterling silver crystal cluster in a brass claw setting that also acts as a clasp that allows the chain to change for the wearer.



*Family Gold Anklet  
18K Yellow Gold  
Fall 2020*

The very last piece of my thesis project focuses on my family's gold story. In Vietnam gold is coveted capital. Vietnam's state-issued money is the đồng, but gold operates as a backup currency. "After periods of foreign occupation, countrywide turmoil, regime change and hyperinflation, many Vietnamese lost faith in state-issued money, Truitt said. They began accumulating gold, which had an external value without borders. Refugees fleeing Vietnam in the 1970s carried gold with them because they did not know where they might end up." (Dawson). Using the twenty-four karat gold my

parents gave me, I decided to make an anklet that I wear on my life's journey as I walk this Earth. I wanted to push my gold further so I decided to alloy my gold into eighteen karat. To make an ounce of eighteen karat gold, I alloyed twenty-one grams of twenty-four karat gold and seven grams of sterling silver. This allowed me to push my gold further. It represents the fusion of my family's Vietnamese culture and my American upbringing from being born and raised in the United States of America. I've been fully immersed in American culture since I started going to school. My blood may be Vietnamese, but my experience is American. After alloying my gold, I poured the eighteen karat gold into an ingot mold, transforming the old gold from my parents' old world into new gold in my new world. The ingots were then passed through a rolling mill, countless times, and then drawn through a drawplate on a homemade draw horse to make sixteen gauge and twenty-two gauge wire. With the sixteen gauge wire, I formed twelve "M" links and twelve round jump rings that alternate. To connect these "M" and "O"s, I used the twenty-two gauge wire to make tiny jump rings that I double layered. This anklet honors my family history and preserves parts of our culture mixed with American culture for future generations to come.

### **Resolution**

Throughout my graduate course, I not only progressed in my metalwork skillset, but I also transformed as a human. I learned lost-wax casting techniques, electroforming, stone setting, and sand casting. I improved my fabrication and cold connection skills and finally recycled my gold material into handmade wire with a homemade draw horse.



I discovered my identity and learned core values from my Vietnamese culture. I ended an era by letting go of some old values that have never served me while celebrating my Vietnamese memories. I proudly and unapologetically emerged into myself, found meditation at my altar, and honored my family history. The journey of riveting my Vietnamese and American culture through jewelry alchemy has been transformational in my metalwork and human experience.

“People don't know. They don't furrow  
between the layers like I do.

They don't switch and twitch  
and actively make the decisions of which...

Which part of me belongs today?

Which aspect of my personality  
will offend the least and blend the most,

and work and succeed and bury the lead  
like a switchboard of traits  
that decide my fate,  
and I'm always an impostor?

Always lost, always asking for directions,

and people point my way

like the scarecrow.

Like tornadoes blowing me

whichever way the wind blows.

Well, Dorothy doesn't want to play today.

I can pack my entire identity in an hour

'cause where there's roots,

there's power, but I'm all topsoil.

That camera that locks

all my memories in a flash,

saved for when my recollection

doesn't last.

That lighter that sparked that fire.

So many lines in the sand,

so many cants and cans.

I see both worlds so clearly,

and I skip and jump and dance

and fall between, never seen.

I belong in the spaces between (Shehzadi).

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